

WHEN DIEGO RIVERAS'S WORK PRODUCED A STORM

This year Mexico and the world commemorate the Centennial of one of its leading 20th Century artists. But his work hasn't always enjoyed the acceptance it has today.

The festivities to commemorate the centennial of Diego Rivera (1886-1957), —one of Mexico's three leading muralist painters, along with David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco— are underway in Detroit, Michigan. Rivera painted one of his greatest masterpieces at the Detroit Institute of Arts: "Detroit Industry", completed in 1933. At the

time, the renowned mural wasn't exactly welcome by all of the automobile capital's society. Nowadays, of course, its greatness is no longer in question, and the city's museum was chosen as the first stop for an international exhibit that will tour the U.S. and Mexico to commemorate the artist's centennial. In this context, VOICES OF MEXICO asked art critic Alicia Azuela to write about the 1933 controversy over Rivera's work, in an attempt to convey some of the difficulties that even the best of Latin America's artists have had to confront in their quest for broader international acceptance. Ms. Azuela, who has written a book on the subject, tells the following story:

Diego Rivera left Detroit in March 1933 several days before his mural was unveiled at the Detroit Art Institute. To his surprise and that of the museum administration, the work unleashed a scandal that would reach far beyond the city's limits.

It all started with a protest filed by Reverend H. Ralph Higgins, Episcopal minister of St. Paul's Church. Besides considering the mural to be in very bad taste, he found it to be irreverent and laden with Communist propaganda. The panel dealing with vaccination had triggered his anger because in his opinion, it made direct reference to the Nativity and satirized Christianity. Reverend Higgins also claimed that the mural's materialistic and atheistic interpretation of the spirit of Detroit was highly offensive. It gave the impression that the city's "gods were sex and science" and "the brutality of the punchclock, the only virtue to be found in our beautiful city." And he contended that "realist murals are as appropriate for our museum as a jazz band for a medieval cathedral."

45



South Wall

life and culture

Ironically, Rivera had not sought to scandalize anyone with this particular mural. He maintained the form of traditional iconography and altered only the content. Certainly for this reason, the figures of the child, the nurse and the doctor correspond to Jesus, Mary and Joseph. The three scientists behind them could well be the Three Wise Men. And the whole scene, including an ox and a cow, clearly represents the Nativity.

46

Contrary to Higgins' views, the artist considered this to be his most important work in the United States. Rivera believed that he had applied the best of his talent to create a typically American artistic expression based on the aesthetics of the 20th century machine. It was the workers of four continents who had created that aesthetic, according to Rivera, and who were the creators of the truly authentic culture of the United States.

But Rivera's intentions were not understood by many conservatives who sided with Higgins and reinforced his positions. Eugene Paulus, a Jesuit and former English professor at Loyola University, agreed that the mural was Communist inspired. The raised fists, he charged, were an unmistakable symbol of the Third Communist International. He considered the dissection scene to be "pornography of a kind that I had never seen before, not even in my travels to India."

He expressed his views to the 300 members of the Detroit Review Club, as well as to the Catholic Daughters of America, and received their full support. They added the charge that the nudes that symbolized agriculture were "a direct affront to American femininity." Complaints were also lodged on behalf of the city's Christian youth by the President of Marygrove College for Girls, Dr. George Hermon Devry, the Catholic Students Club of Detroit, the Detroit Catholic Student Conference and the Knights of Columbus. All threatened to boycott the Institute as long as "such an offensive work" remained on exhibit.

Even some members of the Art Commission objected to the mural and suggested that not only did it attack basic principles, but that by distorting the industrial reality of the city it was also a direct affront to Edsel Ford. Apparently Edsel Ford did not share that opinion; he fully supported the mural's defenders during the entire controversy.

After meeting several times and organizing protest demonstrations, critics formed a united front to request a

court order to have the mural destroyed. On March 23, 1933 the official complaint was filed with the authorities.

The entire city became involved in the controversy, reflecting the spirit of civic involvement that characterized that period in U.S. history. Supporters of the mural reacted as vigorously as did its critics. The museum administration adopted a courageous and committed position in defense of the mural and launched a multi-media campaign to save it from destruction. They did radio shows and gave lectures to explain the true meaning of the mural and wrote pamphlets and articles to defend themselves from the attacks. William Valentiner, E.P. Richardson and Clyde Burroughs, directors of the Detroit Art Institute, played the most active role in the campaign. They aroused so much interest in the matter in Detroit that one Sunday afternoon, some 3500 people viewed the mural in just 4 hours. Within the next few days, they managed to collect 10,000 signatures to present to the courts in defense of the work. They wrote to major art centers, museum directors and art societies around the country, as well, to appeal for support of their project to save the mural.

Valentiner was the first to respond to Higgins' attacks. He published an article attributing the Pastor's anger to an "attack of religious fervor" that had nothing to do with the artistic value of the mural. He explained that the museum could not share Higgins' objections because its criteria for evaluating the artistic and historical importance of a work of art were totally different. He also raised more personal questions about Higgins' credentials as an art critic. He pointed out that Higgins was hardly an art connoisseur; despite the fact that Higgins' church was only a few blocks from the Art Institute the Pastor confessed that he had never toured it. His first and only visit was to determine whether the mural, and most specifically the vaccination panel, fit within the canonical guidelines established by his church for the portrayal of religious themes. Valentiner objected to Higgins' false standards and further claimed that as a minister's son, himself, he knew that no such church canons existed. And finally, he argued that the real issue was the mural's artistic value, that in the end, this would be the only valid justification for preserving it for future generations.

E.P. Richardson gave a series of lectures at the museum in defense of the mural, aimed at responding to those who called it Communist, pornographic and materialistic. "Rivera



The nudes that symbolize agriculture



The vaccination panel

simply believes," he affirmed, "that there is something wrong with our economic system, but that does not make him a Communist. He is humanitarian and rational and seeks greater protection for the common man." In a tongue in cheek manner, he suggested that "spending several days a week at the gym would help those people who find obscenity in the painting."

Richardson claimed that Rivera had not misinterpreted life in Detroit. "Rather he shows the common people, skilled and modest, who take part in democracy and give great importance to the business world, the executive at his desk and the mechanic in his shop...He believes that our science goes beyond our democracy and feels that science and technological development have created a new civilization."

On his radio program, Burroughs used similar arguments: "The battle over the Rivera murals is not being waged on artistic grounds, it is a personal attack by the establishment against Diego Rivera because of his understanding of and sympathetic attitude toward workers and the masses. They resent his creation of a disturbing work of public art." He further claimed that the attacks formed part of the long-standing battle by the establishment, which "has never considered workers or the common man to be apt subjects for understanding art, nor worthy of being represented in artistic expression." Rembrandt and Millet, he explained had also suffered rejection for having portrayed the dignity of the common man and his work.

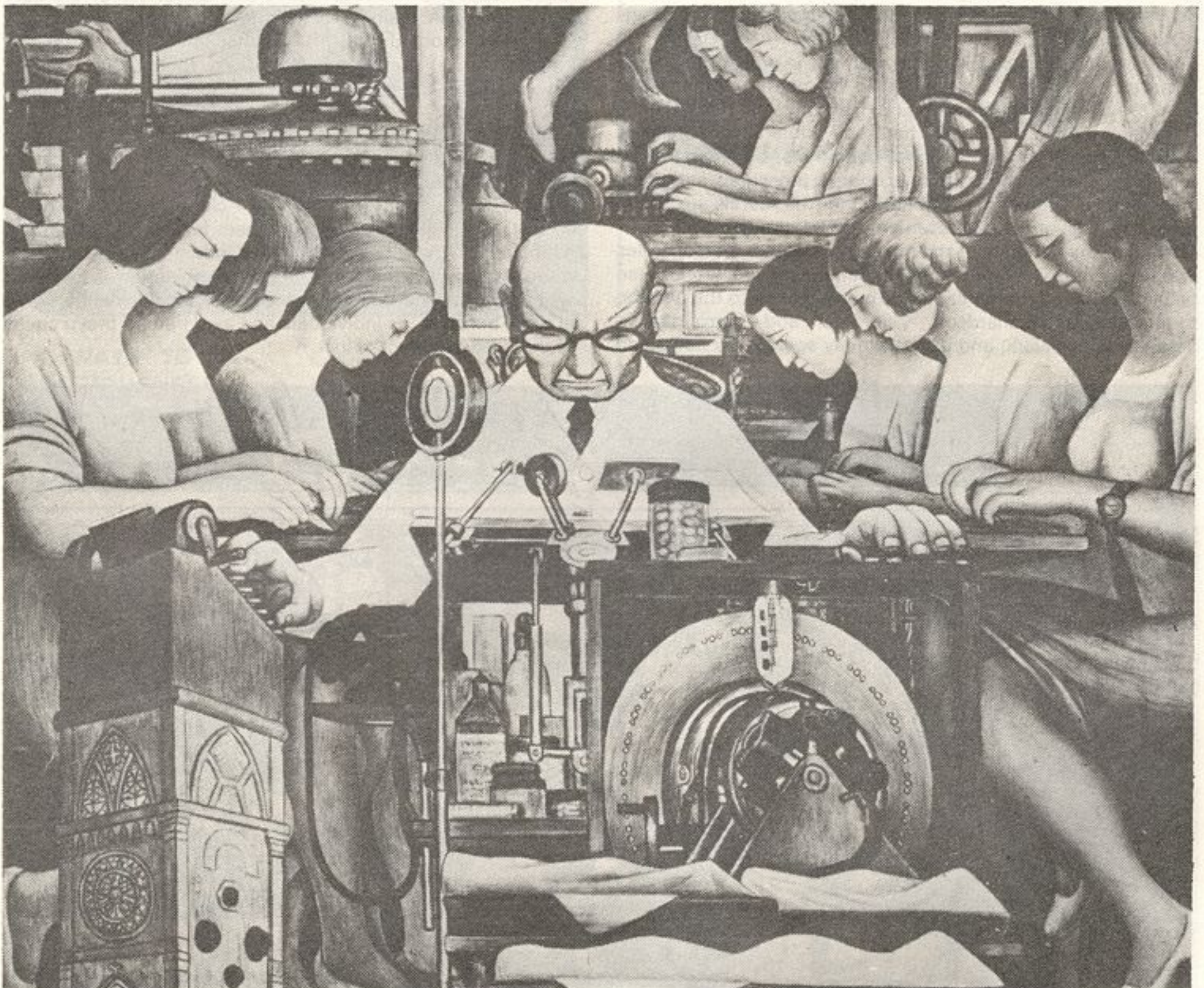
Burroughs correctly emphasized the importance of the controversy's impact on Detroit's heterogeneous population. Vir-

tually everyone reacted in one way or another to the vitriolic attack on the work by conservatives and to its equally energetic defense by the museum's directors. Detractors and supporters, alike, responded strongly. Those who were satisfied with the mural expressed their support to the local papers and to the museum directors.

Among the archives concerning the case, we found the petition with 10,000 signatures from visitors to the museum who approved of the work. The text included the following statement: "The undersigned believe that the Diego Rivera murals in the closed courts of the Detroit Institute of Arts are a sincere expression of the spirit of Detroit and an honest representation of Detroit's workers. For this reason we feel there is nothing sacrilegious in these murals." The signers came from all walks of life and included housewives, engineers, workers, teachers, students, doctors, nurses and even a couple of physicists.

The arguments put forth by private individuals generally coincide with those of the museum directors. One such line of reasoning was a defense against localism and asserted that Rivera should be able to consider himself an American citizen, as capable as anyone else of understanding the United States. The country, they argued, was still very much a melting pot, made up of the many cultures that have come together here, and still without a single, unique culture of its own.

Others said that it was precisely because Rivera was a foreigner that he was able to depict Detroit so truthfully. Mrs. Isabella Holt Finne wrote in a **Free Press** editorial, "Rivera's work expresses the impact of our scientific civilization on an



South Wall detail

life and culture

ingenuous, virile, foreign and deeply poetic mind. Rivera is a master of painting and therefore, his use of color and design allows us to perceive our daily life as if through the facets of a prism."

Rabbi Leon Fram considered the representation of the spirit of Detroit to be truthful, respectful and profound. He wrote to the **Free Press**, "Rivera came at a time when he could see the wonderful machinery of production and presence its current state of paralysis. He could have painted kitchens with no kettles, bank closures, men sleeping in Grand Circus Park and many other things...But apparently he respected Detroit and revered its mechanical genius to such an extent that he chose not to express anything else on the walls of the Courtyard...- Furthermore, the frescoes relate a deeper religious lesson: that common man has the potential for brotherhood."

48

Many denied that the work distorted the reality of labor in Detroit; to the contrary, they felt that this criticism was actually the result of the discomfort produced by the veracity with which the situation was depicted. A Mr. James M. Murray wrote to Burroughs, "As a former Ford worker, who was employed there for over ten years, I wanted you to know that I found the murals very interesting because they represent the life and labor of the worker in the automotive industry." There were many other people who also recognized in the mural a respectful representation of the truth. They pinpointed the origin of the conflict in the narrow-mindedness of the dissenters themselves and not in the mural. The destruction of the mural was vigorously opposed, not only because of its value, but also because many felt that the nature of the attacks on the mural represented a serious threat to the democratic and liberal spirit that many Americans were struggling to preserve.

Some argued that the historical moment in which the events occurred determined their intensity. We quote another letter from the archives, from a Mrs. E.H. Althaus: "I think this irrational and childish show of hate and intolerance would not have transcended under normal conditions, but many of us are feeling neurotic because of economic pressures, and these disgraceful demonstrations of hatred for the murals are a misguided release of our repressed emotions."

Thanks to the initiative of the museum directors, personalities and institutions related to the American art world also became involved. Some came forth in response to the petition formulated by Richardson, Valentiner and Burroughs in defense of the work, and others simply spread the news and

spontaneously contributed to its conservation.

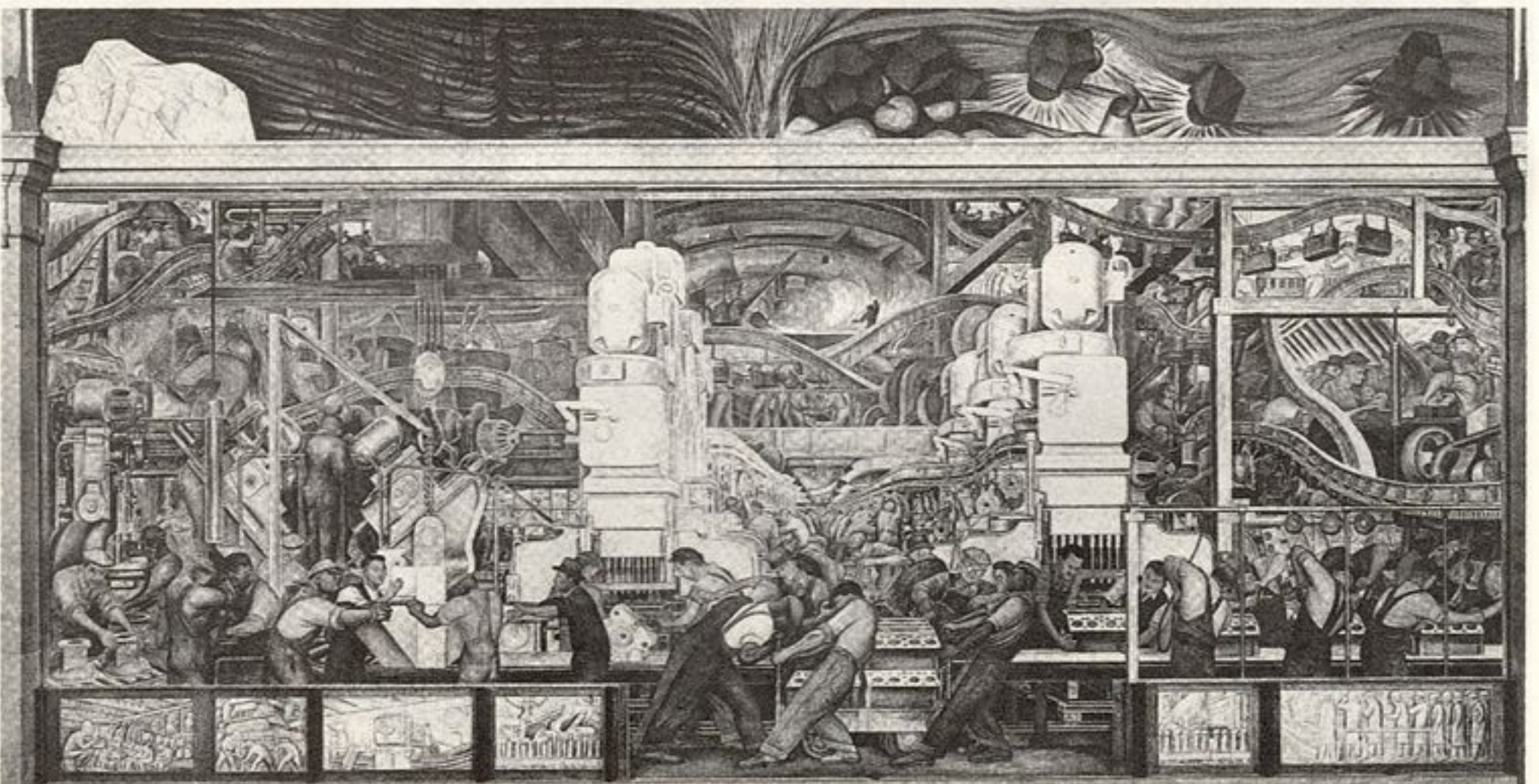
There were also dissenters, however, within the art community; their arguments centered on the fact that Rivera was a foreigner and that therefore, he had quite logically misinterpreted the American spirit. He aroused discontent among Detroit's citizens, they claimed, because he used an artistic language alien and disconcerting to their sensibilities. The fact that he had been commissioned to do the work also provoked resentment. In a period of great unemployment, Rivera had taken the place of an artist from the United States.

An essential part of the plan to conserve the mural consisted in obtaining letters of support from art associations, museums, schools, specialized journals and art critics and historians. The museum directors were successful in submitting this material to the court and offered it as irrefutable evidence that the artistic value of the mural went beyond any ideological conflict that it might have aroused.

In response to the localist arguments voiced by many of the work's critics, the discussion moved to the question of the nature of art. Defenders of the murals maintained that art is timeless, that it transcends any single place, that it is really a part of the patrimony of all nations and of all future generations. Art, then, must be defended from vandalism. Some critics considered Rivera to be the finest muralist in the Western hemisphere, and his artistic merits were clearly reconfirmed in the Detroit murals and in many other works.

The conflict, itself, was given as proof of the importance of the murals because "no superficial work would have produced such a storm." In fact, a part of the essential function of the murals was to evoke a response, a strong reaction on the part of the viewer. A majority of people felt that its destruction would make a fool of the United States in the eyes of the rest of the world. Walter Patch stated, "If these paintings are white-washed, it will not be possible to cleanse the United States."

Despite the importance of the defense organized by its admirers, the strongest arguments for its preservation were to be found in the mural, itself. Its content largely coincided with the basic beliefs and values of middle-class America: recognition of the value of hard work, respect for the common man and the notion that the economic and industrial success of the United States was the result of the combination of the first two principles. The general public, then, could identify with the work because, as individuals and as a nation, they could see themselves reflected in it. ★



North Wall